

# Employment Assistance for Reserve Component Members

Reserve component members face several employment challenges. For instance, they may face career disruptions as they repeatedly transition between their military and civilian careers, or they may not meet the definition of an *eligible veteran*, which would prevent them from qualifying for many federal employment programs. Young reserve component members may be especially vulnerable to employment challenges. In 2012, when the overall unemployment rate was about 8 percent, it was 11 percent for reserve component members and 18 percent for junior reserve component members (ranks E-1 to E-4).

In light of these challenges, the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act required "a review of the feasibility of improving the efforts of the Department of Defense to provide job placement assistance and related employment services directly to members in the National Guard and Reserves." The Office of the Secretary of Defense asked RAND to conduct this congressionally mandated study.

RAND researchers reviewed relevant previous research, conducted informational discussions with employment program managers, and identified ways to improve Department of Defense (DoD) efforts to provide job placement and related employment services for reserve component members. The researchers focused on two key sets of questions. First, do all members of the reserve components have access to employment assistance? Are some receiving more assistance than others? Are there gaps or areas of duplication? Second, are there ways that employment programs can be streamlined or expanded to better serve reserve component members' needs? This brief summarizes the researchers' findings and recommendations.

## Services Provided

The researchers identified 40 federal programs, resources, and offices providing job placement assistance to reserve component members. The bulk of these are provided by DoD, the Department of Labor (DoL), and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Categories of services include résumé or interview preparation; job search and placement; job and career planning; skills assessment and certification; job fairs; assistance with legal issues; assistance with entrepreneurship; internships, assistance, and training; financial assistance; and access to information and tools. About half of the programs are *high touch*, providing

## Key findings:

- A preliminary assessment did not identify any gaps in services or populations served in the current portfolio of federal employment assistance available to reserve component members.
- It can be difficult to navigate federal employment resources, and clear guidance could be helpful to reserve component members.
- Some reserve component members are vulnerable to future gaps in service: (1) those without veteran status, (2) young reserve component members, (3) under-employed individuals, and (4) individuals who live far from military installations or in rural areas.

extended follow-on services that are typically personalized to meet individual needs. The remaining programs are *low touch*, providing one-time services for a short period of time.

Following a review of previous research on reserve component employment challenges and a review of common employment services provided to the general public, the researchers did not find gaps in services in the current portfolio of federal programs that provide job placement assistance to reserve component members. Nevertheless, the researchers found that it is difficult to navigate the large number of programs and resources. Clear guidance on how to navigate this complex web of programs and resources could greatly help service members.

The researchers did find some potential areas of overlap. There are a large number of high-touch, one-on-one, personalized programs providing similar employment services. There are also many duplicative tools and services that could perhaps be streamlined to cut costs and ensure consistency in information. Many of these federal programs might also overlap with state, local, and nongovernmental programs.

## Populations Served

Many programs, including most of the VA programs, serve a limited population, such as service-disabled veterans.

Consequently, only a small portion of the reserve components qualifies for each of these programs. The researchers found seven programs targeted exclusively to the reserve components, all within DoD. DoL programs generally serve all Americans, so they are available to reserve component members. VA programs are usually limited to reserve component members who are veterans.

While the researchers did not find any large gaps in the populations being served, they did identify four reserve component populations that may be at risk of losing services if programs are consolidated: (1) reserve component personnel without veteran status, (2) young reserve component members, (3) underemployed individuals, and (4) individuals who live far from military installations or in rural areas.

## Recommendations

The researchers make several recommendations for improving federal job placement assistance for reserve component members:

- *Clarify the unique employment needs of reserve component members.* Without a comprehensive assessment of the current employment needs of reserve component members, it is difficult to determine whether they have unique needs that are not being met by other programs. This assessment should include surveys, interviews, or focus groups with reserve component members to help identify their employment needs, their awareness and use of different types of programs, and their opinions about these programs' effectiveness.
- *Evaluate the effectiveness of existing programs.* After identifying the current employment needs of reserve component members, the federal government should conduct in-depth evaluations of major employment programs. These evaluations should identify each program's goals and outcomes, assess the effectiveness of each program in meeting reservists' employment needs, ascertain strengths and weaknesses within each program, and identify gaps and overlaps across programs.
- *Assess the costs and benefits of streamlining existing programs and resources.* After identifying reserve component members' employment needs and the effectiveness of existing programs, DoD and other federal agencies

should assess the costs and benefits of streamlining resources. Both the needs assessment and program evaluations will help determine whether and where streamlining should occur. Streamlining could reduce costs by eliminating redundant services, tools, and resources but could limit service delivery to some populations.

- *Improve coordination and information-sharing across programs.* Coordination across programs could increase quickly through very feasible, low-cost measures, such as sharing information about employment needs, measures that programs have taken to address those needs, and planned changes in program activities.
- *Consider the pros and cons of moving responsibility for reserve component employment assistance from DoD to other federal departments.* Moving primary responsibility for reserve component employment assistance to other federal departments whose missions more closely align with providing employment assistance or social services could save costs, streamline services, and make it easier for reserve component members to navigate employment resources. However, the benefits of such a move should be weighed against the potential downsides. For example, DoD has the best access to its reserve component population and the potential to collect vital data on the needs of this population more easily than other federal agencies can.
- *Make existing programs more applicable to the reserve components and increase awareness of them.* This could increase program impacts, reduce costs, help provide consistent information across the components, and prevent the proliferation of redundant programs.

Before making changes to current programs, the researchers recommend that DoD and other federal agencies assess the impact of these changes, ensure that new programs do not overlap with existing ones, recognize that cost is only one aspect of effectiveness, and plan up front to facilitate cost measurement and comparison across programs. These steps will help ensure that any changes are guided by reserve component members' needs while decreasing duplication and filling potential gaps in services.

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Review of the Provision of Job Placement Assistance and Related Employment Services to Members of the Reserve Components

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